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SHOULD PEGGY AND PETER PRAY?

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CENSORSHIP of literature for the young entered last autumn a new zone of controversy. A picture book for children, entitled *Peggy and Peter; What They Did Today*,¹ by Lena Towsley, was the target of much discussion. This book consists, innocently enough, of a series of photographs presenting two fascinating youngsters engaged in a variety of wholesome activities typical of the every-day life in a well-adjusted home. Before the manuscript was released, so it is reported, it was submitted for criticism to a committee of women interested in education. To the amazement of the publishers, these women protested against the inclusion in the book of a picture of these two delightfully natural children kneeling at nighttime in prayer.

The censorship of this group of women would not have been so surprising had they asked for the deletion of the picture showing this brother and sister taking a bath together in the same

tub. Surely looking at such a picture might suggest on the part of other brothers and sisters, unaccustomed to this particular form of co-operative play, a desire which might prove embarrassing to more than one parent. Such children might even ask questions regarding the differences in the physical constitution of members of the two sexes which some parents might consider premature. We have been accustomed so long to accept meekly the dictates of puritanic Comstocks wishing to keep our youthful progeny blissfully ignorant of the facts inherent in the sex side of life that such a censorship would have been considered a necessary compromise with ignorant prejudice. A new kind of taboo, however, was pronounced, when this committee of cultured and educated women protested to a progressive publishing house against the inclusion in a picture book for children of a photograph of a brother and sister kneeling together in prayer.

One of the committee, the proprietor

1. Publishers, Farrar and Rinehart.

of a children's book shop, assured the publishers that the inclusion of the picture would greatly reduce the sales of the book. That was a weighty argument which always appeals to publishers. The real challenge to us, however, who at the moment do not care a whit about the publishers' profits, is the deeper reason stated by one of the mothers on the committee.

These are her words as they were published in the *World Telegram* of New York City, and which called forth vigorous letters of protest and aroused discussion in many parent groups:

If such a picture were put into the hands of my children, I should be in for a bad half hour trying to explain what prayers were and why they did not form a part of their routine. I would not bar the book from the house to save myself this trouble, but I think it is vastly improved by the omission of such a picture, for a great many children today are brought up without ever hearing of God and religion. Mine are among them.

To introduce a small child to the idea of an omnipotent Father may easily rob him of his self-dependence. He may form the habit of leaning on some person or power instead of growing up in the belief that he alone must meet and solve his problems as they arise. One might jeopardize the whole future happiness of a child by telling him that he is accountable to God for what he does and not to his own conscience.²

These are strong words written by a mother who knows clearly what she wishes and what she does not wish for her children. A high idealism and an intelligent concern have ministered to her convictions. We can be glad for the woman's courage in speaking out against the traditional thought of prayer embedded in some of the practices of generations of mothers and fathers. When all this is said, however, the protest at first seems to carry with it something of the atmosphere of a closed room. It sounds like a voice from some modern substitute for the cloistered shelter behind whose walls only those thoughts are permitted which have never been challenged in the Pope's Index. Is such

a censorship the progeny of our modern parent education movement? If so, this new child of modernity demands attention and needs to be understood. Is it begotten of fanaticism and ignorance or are its forebears careful thought and clear insight?



It may be well to remind ourselves, before taking the subject too seriously, that probably for many little children who say prayers at night the act is one of meagre conscious significance. This is likely to be true when the first experiences in prayer have meant the mere saying of words committed to memory. Such children may realize in a vague sort of way that this act is regarded by their parents as of great importance, especially when prayer achievements are exhibited before visitors. Sometimes the carrying through of this ritual involves close physical contact with the parent and possibly an extra kiss and hug. These are pleasant experiences for any child. While the God to whom the words are ostensibly addressed may seem unreal and far away, the parent who approves and loves is very real and close at hand. A kindergarten group of children, when asked to whom they prayed, agreed unanimously that they prayed to their mothers. Such experiences in prayer become pleasantly embedded in a matrix of feelings built upon the sense of security in parental love and esteem. As the years pass, this pleasant emotional glow clings to the ritual, even though the words and the theological concepts never come to life in a conscious meaning.

The very fact that these first experiences of prayer are often so strong with emotion and so weak in thought tends to make the habit of praying hard to change. It becomes a dead thing clamping itself about a growing life so that we have the spectacle of twenty-year-olds who still feel a compulsion to pray "Now I lay me down to sleep" before going to bed, merely because, without

2. *The World Telegram*, October 9, 1931.

the magic of its formula, they do not feel safe or at peace with the universe. The blind doing of a meaningless act, which at the same time is emotionally warm and regarded as important, must in itself be harmful to the integrating of a life. Something not understood is daily handled as if it were known. An emotion is robbed of its eye of reason by which it can see where to go. If children's praying is thus thoughtless and formal, there can be no basis for depending on the habit as a means toward the development of a more grown-up and self-dependent personality.

In this discussion, however, we are not especially concerned with those parents who look upon praying as one of the genteel habits in cultured society for little children to acquire and for aunties to praise. Nor do we address ourselves to those parents who are carelessly procrastinating in their efforts to resolve their own religious conflicts while, at the same time, for the sake of their children, they are clinging to habit which is but a farce. This article is addressed rather to parents of two types: those, like the women on the committee censoring the picture of Peggy and Peter, who are earnestly questioning the assumed values in prayer, and being in doubt are daring to wait; and those other parents who still feel that through prayer some sort of enrichment of life may come to children, and who, even though they may be questioning the theology of churchdom, are unwilling to discard what they believe to be a pearl of great price.

We are interested in discovering what prayer really means to children who are taking their parents' religious instructions seriously. What good are these children seeking by means of prayer? Only when we are able intelligently to answer this question are we in a position to estimate the worth of prayers to such children. The most available evidence at present is to be found in current books containing prayers written by

adults for children's use, and in the accumulating records gathered by parents and teachers giving prayers worded by children themselves and records of children's own questions and remarks regarding prayer. What I write is based admittedly upon unscientifically gained impressions resulting from some years of practical contact with these sources.

I

Taking, then, current books of prayers for children's use prepared by thoughtful leaders in religious education, what are the ideas which these prayers contain? What are children taught to seek after through prayer? An examination of books of this type yields perhaps first of all an impression of the variety and abundance of the good things of life for which little children are encouraged to thank God. These blessings range all the way from "the morning light," the rain, the flowers, the birds, the Bible and Jesus, to "the bread we eat" and "the clothes we wear." In one of the more recent Sunday school lesson helps is found this prayer:

For my big ball and kiddie kar
On which I ride so fast and far
Thank you, Father, thank you.

Probably in thousands of religious homes, the little child's first introduction to God is in his learning to say grace at the table. The repeating of thanks to this unseen provider of the family supply of food is a habit in which tiny children are trained in much the same way as they are taught to hold their spoons.

These illustrations are sufficient to show the lack of effort on the part of parents and teachers to help children to distinguish between universal blessings for which all mankind may feel gratitude and those special privileges which come to but a few. Can such an indiscriminating gathering together of all the people to whom a child is indebted for the good things of life, and merging them vaguely with those natural forces

of the world which are especially pleasing to mankind, and then calling all these good things God, be really the best way to develop a discerning appreciation either of God or of the good things of life? Traditional modes of praise and thanksgiving, however, have led us so to exalt gratitude as a virtue in itself that we have been led to forget the child's need for help toward clear thinking regarding his real status in relation to universal forces.

It is not to be wondered at that little children become confused. It is natural for a spoiled child to jump from the feeling of happiness over the gift of an electric train that he thinks was suggested by God to some kind friend, to resentment because God does not arrange for him to receive the next present desired. There is but a short thought step between thanking God for a little baby sister to the feeling of anger when God sees fit to take little sister away to heaven. A child who is spoiled in his home relations grasps avidly at hints suggesting that he may continue to be a child of special privilege in his relations with ultimate realities.

It is almost as pathetic to see a socially interested child fall for the suggestion of a Santa Claus God ready to scatter gifts for the asking. A nine-year-old child of poverty prayed: "Help the little children, God. I like to have you help them. Will you please give them clothes and food to eat and shoes to wear and stockings to keep their legs warm." Adults who have spiritualized old formulas with modern reservations are often unconscious of what their words are saying to little children. If taught to thank God for material benefits, it is most natural that those who

are themselves in the midst of poverty and those who are sensitive to the sufferings of others should ask a fairy God to provide these same comforts more plentifully and to distribute them more fairly.

The spirit of thankfulness and joy in life is a precious attitude to be cherished in childhood, but it becomes a mere pose to please teachers if back of it there is no sound thinking. Nature is lavish in her blessings and deserves appreciation. On the other hand, nature is also sometimes hostile, threatening our very existence.

Our hope of gaining the good things of life for all mankind, including ourselves, is dependent upon our understanding of the forces within and without us. Our hope of understanding rests upon the dependability of an orderly universe. For the extent of

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nature's dependability and understandability all mankind may well be profoundly grateful. Such security, to be sure, is not completely comforting. It is nevertheless continually challenging.

These bigger thoughts of appreciation are not possible for little children who have not already had a number of direct experiences with life and nature, each contributing a little thought, until gradually there grows a conscious appreciation of the intelligence and unity back of all phenomena and a sense of being a part of the *elan vital* in the universe. Watching the bursting of a cocoon, witnessing the coming of kittens, studying the co-operative life of bees, meeting strange-looking people and feeling a kinship in the inner life—such experiences as these furnish spiritual vitamins for an expanding personality. Words of ritual and prayers to God may well be delayed until the

tissues of thought and appreciation are built up.

A seven-year-old boy, along with others of his age, had spent Sunday morning playing beside a brook and waterfalls. Later in recalling the experience, he said feelingly:

I love to listen to the waterfalls—
It is like music.
I want to be quiet and rest and listen,
But the water never rests—
It goes on and on—
Where does it go?

Gratitude was bubbling in his spirit and more than gratitude. There was an abandonment in his response to the rhythm and to the tones of the running brook and in his appreciation of a something different from himself and a wonder regarding its destiny. Even though his thoughts were not linked with a personal God, it seems to me he was experiencing the beginnings of that indefinable experience of which mystics have spoken.

II

A second outstanding impression resulting from a study both of prayers worded by adults for children and of those worded by children themselves is the prevalence of direct petitions for special privileges. Preëminent among these privileges has been protection and care, particularly during the night. Possibly nine out of ten of all the nightly prayers of young children contain petitions for special protection through the night by God or by his angels. The old prayer from the New England Primer, "Now I lay me down to sleep," which, strange to say, is the only stanza from that ancient manual which is still in common use, contains this wish that God would keep the soul while the body sleeps. More modern verses have discarded this dualistic philosophy of soul and body and openly request special care through the night.

Jesus, tender, Shepherd, hear me;
Bless thy little lamb tonight;
Through the darkness be thou near me;
Keep me safe till morning light.

Weary now I go to bed;
I close my eyes and rest my head.
Father, let thy watchful eye
Be upon me as I lie.

Dear Father, whom I cannot see,
Smile down from heaven on little me.
Let angels through the darkness spread
Their holy wings about my bed.

Parents who no longer believe that special divine providence can be secured for themselves by the asking, justify children's praying such petitions on the ground that they need a stronger feeling of security than grown-ups. Granting, however, the special need of children in this regard, it is still fair to ask this question: How many children who are really afraid of the dark or of unusual dangers that are especially imminent when parents are asleep, are given a sense of safety through such prayers? Some have said that the praying of such prayers as children made them more afraid than they would have been had not the need of prayer been suggested.

It is to be further questioned whether this method of removing fear is desirable, even if successful. "You lied to me," Mary said to her mother, after a hurricane had blown away their home. "You told me that God would take care of us and not let any hurricane hurt us, and now He hasn't cared a bit and He has let our house and everything we had be blown away." Any assurance given to little children of protection beyond the limits that real experience justifies would seem to be hazardous. Even though catastrophes may be spared our own children, unjustifiable expectations of special favor from the God of the universe tend to narrow the horizon of social interest, and to foster a spirit of superiority to others who are the victims of disaster. A broadening of sympathies comes though the consciousness of humanity's common adventure in the presence of uncertainty.

III

A third very common type of prayer in which children are encouraged is for

personal help in doing things which they are led to believe they cannot achieve of themselves. The attainments about which adults seem most concerned lie in the realm of ethics. A well-known prayer of this type is this:

Father lead me day by day
Ever in thine own sweet way.
If I'm tempted to do wrong
Make me steadfast, wise and strong;
Show me what I ought to do,
Teach me to be pure and true.

One suspects that such prayers express parents' ideals for their children, rather than the children's greatest wishes for themselves. Unfortunately there are many children who feel so small and incompetent because smothered by parental will power that they would be too timid to express their own wishes openly in prayer. An eight-year-old boy was encouraged by his mother to pray to God to help him stop the habit of nightly enuresis. Docilely he did his mother's bidding night after night without accomplishing the result the mother desired. So earnest was she to win her desire that she had pitted both God and herself against the boy's real wish, but in vain, for the child secretly hugged his weapon of power, and one wonders what happened to his personal picture of God. A more daring four-year-old upon whom the same procedure was tried just once, the next morning spoke out her conclusion emphatically, "I don't think much of God."

A mother wearied after a strenuous day, said to her daughter, "Go to bed and say your prayers, Ruby, and ask God to make you a good little girl tomorrow." "I don't have to ask God," said Ruby with confidence, "I'll make myself good." These confident and courageous young children of today are flinging puzzling challenges at traditional religion. Just how, if at all, are one's spiritual resources to be augmented by means of prayer? Clear thinking needs to be done at this point. Whatever we may believe, however, we shall probably

agree that unless the prayer on the part of the one who prays is the expression of a whole-hearted desire to achieve the virtue asked for, praying is as futile as the tinkling of a cymbal. At least then God will not grant any extra help.

When children's real desires, however, are revealed in spontaneous and unlearned prayers, these sometimes prove surprising and even shocking to parents. Unfortunately, being unaccustomed to frankness in religious matters, adults are often too timid to suggest to children any doubt regarding prayer as the way out, lest the children's faith be undermined. An awkward lad on entering boarding school found himself inferior in sports. "O God, help me to run fast," was his genuine prayer and a wholesome desire. Another child of seven who could not swim was watching older boys and girls diving and sporting about in the river. "It takes magic to swim. You must have asked God to teach you the magic," he said to the best swimmer among them. "I went up to God, too, and asked him to make me swim." Again, a rather spoiled maiden of eight who in a predicament had evidently secretly prayed after the fashion of King Saul when searching for his asses, surprised her teacher on Sunday morning by saying, "I hated God this morning because he wouldn't help me to find my doll's slippers." In all these cases the children's prayers were the expressions of genuine desires; but the help which each child needed was not some supernatural power to augment or grant his wish, nor even a belief in such a power, but some understanding person to help him look at his wish, to see what would happen if it were fulfilled, and whether or not some other wish might be more truly satisfying, and, if the wish were worth striving for, what help he needed if any, and of what nature that help might be.

It must be admitted that the half-hearted repeating of dictated prayers for adult-inspired virtues, the throwing upon

God the responsibility for success or failure, and the expectation of miraculous wisdom or an augmentation of will power from above probably tend to weaken character.

Shall we then do as the educated mothers on the committee censoring the picture of Peggy and Peter at prayer? Shall we strike out from the daily program of our children's lives the experience of saying prayers? Before launching so drastic a revolution, there is another question to be raised. Has the habit of praying sometimes served to keep alert in children a desire to grow up rather than a desire to remain childish? If so, what is it in the experience of praying that sometimes increases courage, strengthens self-control and leads to a more realistic facing of life? Are these elements in the better experiences in prayer dependent upon the specific religious faiths which mould the forms of the prayers? Would it be unfortunate for the modern child of liberal or agnostic parents to lose these values?

Three such elements, it seems to me, have been found in the prayer experience at its best, which can be considered apart from the symbols of faith used—three fundamental elements that have given prayer creative value. Let us look at these elements and consider whether or not it is possible for agnostic parents, without jeopardizing their intellectual integrity and without encouraging infantile attitudes in their children, to find some sort of substitutes for prayer which may yield values somewhat commensurate with those some people still find in prayer.

IV

In a young people's meeting not long ago, a young woman told how for a number of years she had not been able to pray. Nevertheless, a vague feeling of loss clung to her till at last she began to wonder if it were really necessary for her, in order to maintain her intellectual honesty, to abandon everything that had

been in the prayer habit. So she began the daily practice of setting aside a period for quiet meditation alone. During this time she thought over each day's doings, she saw her shortcomings, and felt sorry for her mistakes and made her resolutions to do differently at the next opportunity. With the progress of her experiment she felt the sense of loss disappearing. She found spiritual refreshment in this simple ritual of her own making.

Some parents who no longer feel natural in asking their children to kneel in prayer are planning similar periods for them when, either alone or with some grown-up, the children may quietly think and talk over frankly the day's conflicts and joys. Such occasions for little children might make possible their first steps away from an unmeditative snatching of life in momentary pieces, toward a taking of a longer-time view of themselves and of their growing social world. If the modern child is encouraged to live without some periodic opportunities to reflect in quiet and he becomes accustomed hastily and superficially to snatch the scraps of life that are immediately at hand, he will miss much. Children have not infrequently found this value in the act of prayer. Such experiences tend to deepen the stream; and to give life fullness of meaning.

To achieve the camaraderie needful if such periods of shared meditation are to be honest, frank, and happy, parents need to learn how to look upon the problems of home relationships realistically and calmly, on the one hand, without feeling a desire to blame children or to put them to shame, and, on the other hand, without gratifying parental self-esteem by feeding children's natural tendency to idealize their elders. The talking over of everyday events with children calls for a fine art if children themselves are to be given the opportunity to take the major steps in the thinking process. Until as parents we

learn to be understanding co-operators in such quiet meditations, the privacy of prayer times, with no parental listeners, may prove more emotionally releasing and more inspiring.

V

A second element found in high-minded prayer seems to have enriched and expanded life even for young children. This element, difficult to describe, is that indefinable emotional something that comes with reaching beyond and beneath the casual happenings of life toward greater and deeper meanings. It involves the consciousness of looking forth in the direction of universality or infinity or eternity for a sense of value and proportion.

To those whose faith brings assurance of an answering Voice of sympathy and understanding in the universe, this reaching forth toward the eternal mystery that makes the whole world kin has brought a sense of peace, a feeling of being at home in the universe. Such a faith in an ultimate source of security has sometimes, even for children, contributed to an integrating poise that has enhanced the worth of their personalities.

Whatever our creeds may be, however, we should not blind ourselves to the reality we face—an unknown something, within and without us, beyond our human control. Why pretend otherwise? We may have grown content in not asking for special privileges in this orderly universe. We may not expect in return for our efforts at goodness special care from a superhuman person, nor divine protection from hazard beyond that given to other human beings. Yet who wishes to live as a dumb insect, going the rounds of his existence, unconscious of the possible meanings hidden behind the things apparent about us? Even the cave man began wondering why the wind blew, and why the rain fell, and we should be more savage than he were we never to wonder regarding the rea-

sons back of the phenomena about us, or were we never to reach out the tentacles of our minds far enough to question regarding the first cause of all. We crave a deeper understanding of what is conditioning and enveloping us, lest we miss some of the possibilities of life. We should covet for our children, too, some such experiences which may help them to stretch the arms of their understanding as far as they can reach, for it is so easy to limit the embrace of intelligence and appreciation to a tiny world.

The minds of little children begin in this wistful struggle to understand life sooner than most parents realize. Whatever our own faith, we may endeavor to keep alert to the beginnings of thoughtfulness in children regarding things that are back of the superficialities of existence. The first "whys" and "hows" we may look upon as opportunities to open doors into a larger world. The first expressions of joy in beauty, the first wonderings about the beginnings of life or the meaning of death, the first thrill from a sunset, or a moonlight, the first appreciations of quality in human endeavor—all these outgoings we may cherish for the possibilities they promise of an expanding experience.

The conditions likely to provide the occasion for such experiences might well be sought. Such times might even be given a name, in order to encourage children to ask for their return. For example, they might be called "Our Wondering Time" or "Our Questioning Time," and records might be kept of the questions which no one could answer, about which adults and children alike are wondering. "Do you suppose the scientists will ever find out just what God is like?" asked eight-year-old Jean. "I wish I could live four thousand years so that I could learn all that they will ever learn about God." Later, still unsatisfied, she said, "I wish I could live to the very end; then I would know all about it. I'd like to live to see the end

of it all." Jean's thinking time with her mother had yielded her this indefinable something which some other child might have found through prayer. Jean's youthful spirit had peered though the mist that bounded her own memories and she was left discontented to close her eyes to any horizon that might hold a sunrise.

VI

A third element in prayer which has sometimes given it worth is that which is at the core of all petitionary prayer, namely, the real desire of the heart. James Montgomery's hymn, used in Christian churches for over a hundred years, contains this thought:

Prayer is the soul's sincere desire,
Uttered or unexpressed,
The motion of a hidden fire
That trembles in the breast.

In prayer, some children have felt they could lay their wishes before Some One who understands and cares. Even though they have been too intelligent and too socially-minded to expect special favors, they have gained added confidence. Light from the face of an Understanding Personality at the very heart of the universe has helped children to see the nature of their wishes and to become more mature in relating them to a real world. Such an experience is re-creative.

Whether or not as adults we are assured of the nature of the personality at the heart of the universe, we should learn how to do our share in giving our children the peace and poise they need for life's adventure, through being ourselves understanding parents. We need to learn to see behind children's doings to the wishes that prompt their efforts. We need to learn to listen to our children's dreams, to see from beneath the animal and giant figures in their dream stories children's fears and secret desires smothering and panting for breath. Without making children conscious of the complexities of the psychoanalytical

process, parents need to learn how to encourage wishes to come out into the open air where children may see them and become acquainted with their real natures and compare them with other people's wishes. We need to help children to see which of their wishes can endure the rigors of a real world, and which are made of gossamer wings.

To do this we need as parents an understanding of the undercurrents in our own lives. We need to learn how to share our own wishes more frankly with our children, those which we have outgrown, those which we still need to change and those which we have thought worth keeping. We need to learn never to condemn a wish or to instill a sense of shame for any wishing, else the tender things will fly back and make caves for themselves in the child's unconscious. Our children would not be presenting their wishes to us in the hope of our granting them their desires. Rather we would together be presenting our wishes to life, or to God, if our faith would permit. Whichever it may be, such an experience of self-examination into the inmost sources of the springs of life, should help purge our wishes clean from futility and vanity and release the good in them with undimmed vitality.

Hesitation is seemly when suggesting so delicate an art for parents to seek to learn. We need much more help than psychiatrists and teachers have as yet given us in order to learn how, without assuming the part of confessor or judge, to talk over helpfully with children the secret wishes that are ever pushing from within. Children's night and daytime dreams are delicate fabrics that are easily damaged by clumsy handling. We can never hope to achieve complete intimacy with our children. The wall of age is a real barrier. Children wisely guard their inmost wishes, and never reveal them upon demand. Unless they feel sure that these most priceless treasures will be understood, appreciated, and treated with respect, they will not expose

them, for these inner flames of desire are elusive, even to children themselves. Hilda Conkling realized she had these wordless secrets, but few children could express their feelings as she has done:

I have a secret from everybody in the world
full of people
But—I cannot always remember how it goes.³

It is our opportunity, if we are sensitive, to help lift the impotency from children's speech, and to make possible for them the joy of release and understanding.



There now abide, therefore, these three values. Many of the past generation and many today have found them in prayer:—the quiet meditation on life, the reaching out toward the universal and infinite, and the courageous facing of one's profoundest wishes. Let those who can still believe in the faith of their fathers seek first for their children these fundamental spiritual values and keep forms and creeds from stunting creative

3. Hilda Conkling, *Poems by a Little Girl* (Fred A. Stokes & Co.).

yearnings. Let them not hurry to tell three- and four-year-olds what God is like, even though they may think they know, or to begin too early with children the habit of praying. The thought of God is too great for baby shoulders to carry. Young children must belittle and distort it in order to fit it into their frames of understanding. Let such parents first of all seek to enlarge their children's life-patterns through varied and stimulating experiences and introduce God when children begin to ask for Him and feel the need that Someone unify life's variety for them.

Those others whose faith is inarticulate, let them sense and share with their children the glory and mystery of everyday things. Let them look with sympathy upon humanity's age-long dilemmas. Let no questions be taboo. Let them warm ancient rituals with the fires of appreciation and understanding, or create new ways as worthy for our days as were the ways of our fathers for the days gone by. The next generation can ill afford to have the deeper values deleted from the book of life.



